

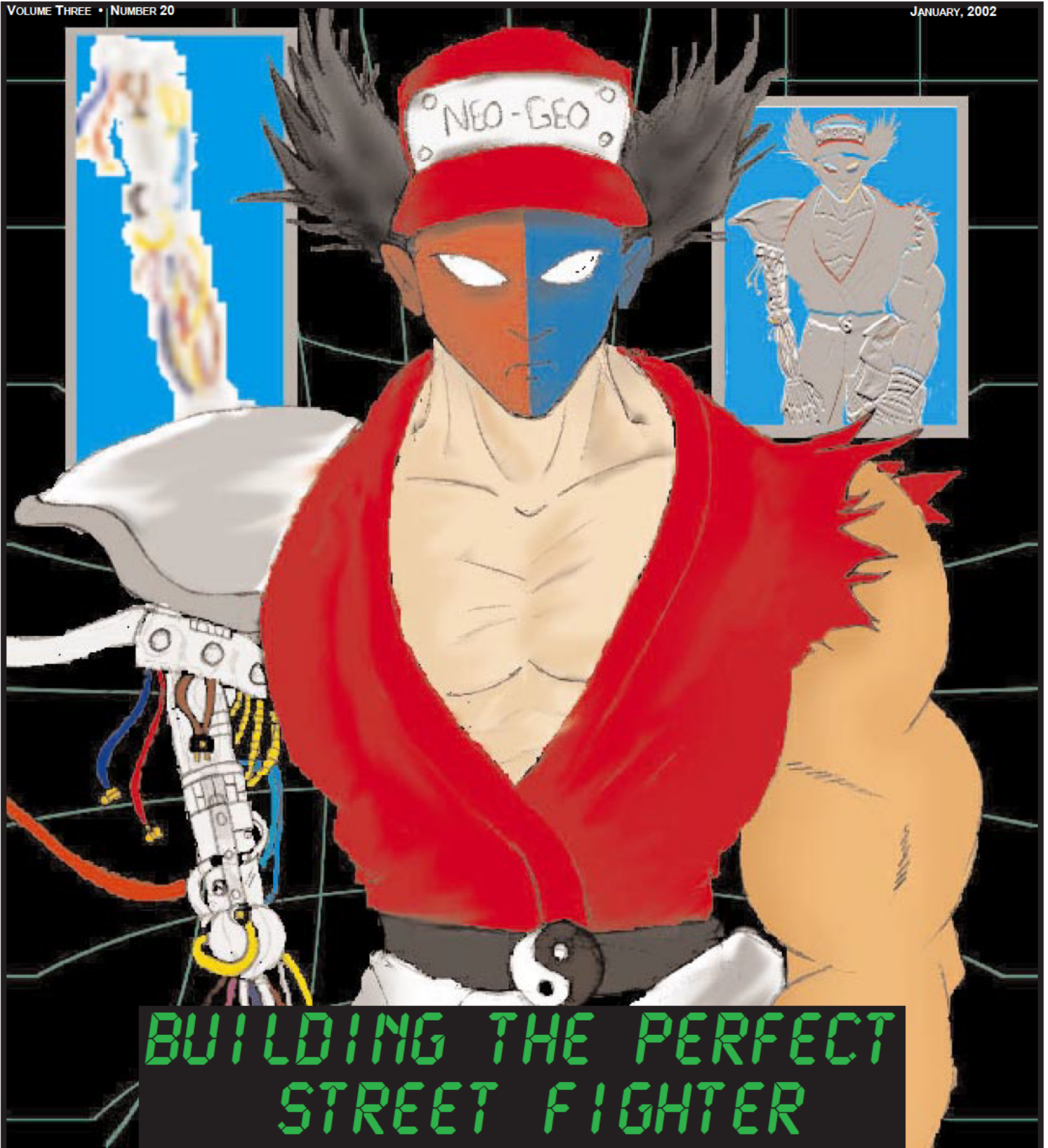


ON SCREEN CHAOS



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BUILDING THE PERFECT
STREET FIGHTER

ON SCREEN CHAOS

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Mega Man goes RPG! Sort of...

System: Game Boy Advance

Publisher: Capcom

Release Date: November 1, 2001

MICHAEL "SVENYIP" TROUPE

On Screen Correspondent



No, don't run screaming yet. This isn't another "Mega Man Legends" on our hands here (thank god). But it IS separate from the Mega Man/Mega Man X universes, because the main character isn't even

Mega Man. You're a boy called Lan, in a world where Cyberspace is supreme and cyber crimes are running rampant. Most people have a virtual PET- Lan's just happens to be "MegaMan.EXE," who is able to fight against these cyber hackers.

The game has a Pokemon feel to it, in the ways that you walk around towns and interact with your environment. It's drawn in a weird diagonal angle, though, which can take some getting used to.

The battle system is unique- it's real-time, where you're fighting on a 3x6 grid, each side able to move on a 3x3 area of that grid. So you do a lot of moving up and down, dodging attacks and striking back with your Mega Buster. In addition, you choose 15 of a selection of chips that you find during the game as special attacks. After a set interval, 5 of those chips will randomly become available, and you can choose one to equip yourself with. (Or more, if they end up being the same type or same "letter" of attack- so there's definite strategy needed in how you select your chips.) Chip powers can let you move onto your enemies' squares (helpful with short-range attacks), swing a Cyber-Sword, shoot various projectiles, or attack with the special abilities of the bosses you defeat. Chips are both hidden and found from fights, also like the monsters of Pokemon.

The story is a little far-fetched, as evil forces from the WWW keep trying to take over your town in such diabolical ways as making ovens explode (caused by a virtual Fireman that you have to defeat) or take over the town's water supply (freezing it with Iceman) so everyone will dehydrate. Apparently the idea of going to the next town and getting some water is too complex for them. What is also odd is that the creators seem to have a soft spot for the first Mega Man game - so far I've encountered Fireman, Iceman and Gutsman, as well as some random guy called Numberman that they invented just for this game. Protoman has made an appearance, too.

Unfortunately, much as I liked this game, it fell victim to the "wait, I really can't afford this right now" syndrome, so I had to return it before I could get too far into it. Some day, I'll be able to pick it back up and continue the wacky adventures in cyberspace. And answer the question that everyone wants to know- is Dr. Wily somehow in this game, too? They *did* use the "Wily Symbol" at one point, I think.

...of course, I could just look at a FAQ. But FAQs suck. ☹

Another strange failed hybrid

System: NES

Publisher: Hot B

Release Date: July 6, 1990

TONY "XOT" MORSE

On Screen Editor



Palamedes is an oddball NES cart that I randomly found at Babbage's a while back. Since I love to collect oddball stuff, I simply had to pick it up. It's a strange hybrid of Tetris and Yahtzee. Rows of dice continuously scroll down from the top of the screen, and you have to eliminate them, in the process, making poker hands out of the numbers on the dice.

To eliminate a die, you tap the 'B' button repeatedly, until the die your character is holding shows the desired number. You then launch it at the target die - if they match, the dice disappear and the die is placed on a rack below the board. The rack can hold up to six dice, and by pressing 'down' on the control pad, the computer will calculate your score for that particular hand of dice. The better your hand, the more points you will score and the greater number of lines will be removed from the playfield. After all the lines in the level have been cleared, you will advance to the next, slightly faster, level.

At first, I really liked the concept of this game. The skill required to play is moderate at best, but the strategy level is pretty decent. But the game has a couple of fatal flaws that make it more of a collector's piece than a frequently-played title.

First off, I don't like the idea of lines being cleared when you score a hand. The game is score driven, so one would assume the goal is to achieve a high score. By scoring your hand, you actually destroy dice with which you could have made additional hands. I *suppose* you could attribute this to an attempt to add more strategy, since you are faced with the option of scoring the hand you have or creating a better one with the dice in front of you. Still, it just seems wrong.

But what made me stop playing altogether was the bonus system. At the end of each round you receive a bonus based on your performance during the level. If you don't score any hands, your bonus is 50,000 points, far, far greater than you can achieve by scoring hands and tallying points the 'honest' way. In short, the game rewards you for not playing correctly. In several attempts I was *never* able to get 50,000 points total for a single level by actually scoring hands.

Admittedly, I stumbled across this because at first I didn't understand how to score hands (by pressing down) and so, I simply *didn't*. But once I understood how the game was intended to be played, this fault just jumped out at me. Sadly, I can't get past this now. It would be like if in a Galaga bonus round, you scored 15,000 points for shooting *nothing*, as opposed to the 10,000 for shooting *everything*. Why would you bother to shoot?

With that in mind, I ended up thinking, why would I ever play this game? And now I simply don't.



Capcom vs. SNK 2 is another 2-D masterpiece

Numerous options and nearly 50 characters provide tons of replay value

System: Playstation 2

Publisher: Capcom

Release Date: November 30, 2001

MICHAEL "SVENYIP" TROUPE

On Screen Correspondent

Capcom is one of the few companies left that is still willing to "risk" releasing 2-D games in an increasingly 3-D world. So is it any wonder that I continue to play most of the titles they release, Resident Evil notwithstanding?

Capcom VS SNK 2 is another blatant "money title," if you get right down to it. With the roster they have to choose from, there's really no reason they couldn't have included all these characters- and more- in the *original* CvS. (I think this also explains why they rarely do more than two games in one series anymore - it allows them to release a new spinoff with a low number of characters, and a sequel to *that* spinoff with little more than an expanded roster.)

To their credit, they did more in this game besides just keeping the same fighting engine and adding more players to it. The "groove" system has been changed, so you can pick anywhere from 1-3 characters and decide their strengths yourself - no longer are you forced to play with characters like Sakura fixed at Level 1 and Balrog fixed at Level 3. Which is good- given the limited number of Ratio 1 characters in the first game, I got sick *real* fast of fighting teams made up of four of them...

There are also six fighting grooves where they once were two, touching on most of the famous elements of both the Capcom and SNK fighting systems. Capcom grooves include abilities like Custom Combos, Air Blocking and Parrying, while the SNK grooves have both the "Advanced" and "Extra" super gauge systems, sidesteps, and even the Samurai Showdown "Rage" gauge makes an appearance. Combine these with the ability to create your own fighting groove, and you can finally do things like combining Parries with Custom Combos. (As to why you'd want to is anyone's guess.)

Nearly 50 characters are included in the roster for this title - this includes alternate versions of the same character, like Evil Ryu and Orochi Iori. Some of the new choices are kind of surprising, though. Who would have ever expected Rolento from Final Fight/Street



Fighter Alpha 2 would have been included in this game? (But what do they have against Rose, to never give her the chance to be in another game? Enquiring minds wanna know.) Or Eagle, one of the forgotten characters from Street Fighter 1? Or Yun from Street Fighter 3? None of these are high-popularity characters, or "fireball/uppercut" ones, to Capcom's credit. Maki from Final Fight 2 also was added for this game (she plays a lot like a rush Guy) and Kyosuke from- I'm not entirely *sure*. Rival Schools, I believe. Oh, and to continue with tradition, they've changed Chun-Li's moveset *again*- she now looks and plays like in SF3:Third Strike.

New SNK recruits include the much asked-for Athena, the much-unexpected Chang/Choi combination (they're actually one character - Chang with the iron ball does the actual fighting, and Choi acts as a special move with legs), and the much-unwanted Ryuuhaku Todo from Art of Fighting 1, who *still* only really has one "special move." Other additions include Haohmaru from Samurai Showdown with his annoying sword, and Rock Howard, probably the coolest character from "Garou: Mark of the Wolves."

The premise to this game is another crossover fighting tournament which - big surprise - ends up being a fighting ground for more important events that you just happen to blunder into. In this case, if you do well enough in the game, it's a battle between Akuma and Rugal, and it seems to be random who wins. The victor, however, gets new abilities from the evil energy of the other, and then you have to fight this horror. Whether it's Akuma with a 30+ hit instant hell murder and new grab-and-counter moves, or Rugal with a teleport and an instant hell murder of his *own*, you really don't wanna deal with *either* of these horrors. At least they're stylish and have cool music, unlike Cyber-Akuma from Marvel Super Heroes VS Street Fighter, who is best left forgotten.

Is this, then, the closest thing out there at present to the "Ultimate Fighting Game?" On paper, maybe, as it has more characters and more options to choose from than anything else to date. But one big strike against it is the number of backgrounds - there's less than a dozen, three of them are boss-exclusive, which means you hear a *lot* of the same music. And while the backgrounds are flashy and in 3-D, I'd have been happier with different background music for each character, something we haven't had since Street Fighter Alpha 3.

But let's continue THIS discussion in the "Ultimate Fighting Game" article, where it belongs.

X6 spices up the Mega Man series

System: Sony Playstation

Publisher: Capcom

Release Date: December 6, 2001

MICHAEL "SVENYIP" TROUPE

On Screen Correspondent

For about thirteen years now, the Blue Bomber has been gracing the world of video games. And for a series that has stayed almost painfully predictable in its formula (fight eight robot masters, go to a final area typically with four stages, fight all the robot masters again at the end, then fight a multi-form version of a Dr. Wily creation or Sigma), it has remained one of those "must have, must play, must beat in two days" series for a long time now.

The Megaman "X" series, while good, was always missing something that the original had. The Robot Master names - you can never remem-

ber the things! You'll never forget the original Megaman 'bot names, as indicated by the fact that I can still name all of them from 1-8 without a problem, and even the hideous ones like Tomahawk Man still put a smile to my face. But X had animal masters, which just lacked the personality of the originals. I don't think I can even name *one* 'bot from X3 off the top of my head, and I played through it just a few months ago. Then X5 came out, where the US team decided to change the names to parodize Guns 'n Roses members - and names like "Mattrex" and "The Skiver" were the result.

So when X6 was released, barely a week after the Japanese version, I felt some trepidation but I also knew I had to get it. Would it be like Megaman 6 was, the only Megaman game I played, beat, and returned within Electronic

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Just Bring It gets high marks as a simulator

System: Playstation 2

Publisher: THQ

Release Date: November 20, 2001

MICHAEL "SVENYIP" TROUPE

On Screen Correspondent

The desperate attempt to find some other wrestling video game to "watch" (WWF Attitude is definitely starting to show its age) led me to take a look at WWF Smackdown: Just Bring It for the PS2.

I didn't have much hope for the game, as I never liked the way the first two played. The punches and kicks made people fly around crazily, you could get hit by moves at the strangest of times, and the Smackdown 2 story mode was the thing that nightmares are made of. (Load for 20 seconds, watch the APA in the locker room, have the game say, "I wonder what the APA are talking about," load for 20 more seconds, watch a match that you're not even a part of...)

But I was pleasantly surprised with Smackdown 3. They've toned down the length of punch-kick combinations, and it's easier to reverse attacks if you're finding yourself pummeled. It might almost be too easy to reverse, encouraging a defensive strategy. And the variety of matches, like Ladders, Cage, Hell in the Cell, TLC, Street Fight and more are interesting. (Although the Ladder Matches aren't "WWF Realistic," as those guys can set up the ladder, climb up and grab the belt in about four seconds!)

The Story Mode, unfortunately, is weak. You pick a character or created wrestler, but it only lasts until you've won a title, and always follows the same basic path. This can take as little as a single match to accomplish (if you go after a title like the European or Light Heavyweight), and never takes more than four. Each time you win or defend a title, you'll unlock some secrets, and you'll find hidden wrestlers by making certain decisions. I unlocked most of my options by winning the Women's Title with a created wrestler and defending it repeatedly. It's not too hard to survive the wrath of Trish Stratus (I'm sorry, the what?) when you've got a character with Tajiri's moveset and the Stone Cold Stunner.

Create a Wrestler is elaborate, and in some ways manages to rival WWF Attitude. Once you've unlocked everything, there's a variety of outfit options to choose from, and a "layer" system which allows you to wear more than one shirt, or have more than one hairstyle, so you can combine from various things to get much better looking attire combinations, if you have the time to experiment. And while no custom music will ever rival WWF Attitude ("Eye of the Chicken," baby!), there's over a dozen created themes to work with here, if you don't want your created wrestlers to enter to 'real' themes.

You can set up 'stables' of 2-5 characters, which will enter as Tag Teams or groups of 3, depending on the type of match you're

doing. And when you're in a match, run-ins can occur, but only if you're part of a stable, as your partners come down to help. Interference will continue until the ref gets in the person's face and forces them to leave the ring, which is a neat feature. If you want to risk disqualification, grab the ref and throw him in a submission hold- he can't throw your illegal aid out if he can't get to them!

The biggest flaw is that you can only make twelve superstars, whereas WWF Attitude allowed for as many superstars as you had memory cards (up to 150 per card). Which makes it hard to run an actual "Neo-Life Wrestling Federation," a craving I tend to get at least twice a year. But with a limited roster of characters, it allowed me to create a Fed with an actual ranking system and max-minning the match order in ways that nobody else would understand or care about. But hey, that's what I live for. And if you're really bored, you can check out the status of the NLWF at <http://www.geocities.com/svenyip/NLWF.html> - but knowing me, I'll have probably lost interest and found another project by the time this issue is released.

So Smackdown: JBI is a solid game in its own right. I still think the best *playing* wrestling game out there is WWF No Mercy for the N64, but that's not as fun a game to watch as either this one or WWF Attitude are. "WWF Raw is War" is supposed to use the same game engine as No Mercy, but since that's for the X-Box, it's unlikely I'll ever get the chance to play it.



Ms. Pac-Man update really can cause Madness

System: Sega Dreamcast

Publisher: Namco

Release Date: November 16, 2000

TONY "XOT" MORSE

On Screen Editor

Since this is a Dreamcast title, I feel it necessary to start with my usual preamble: **THE DREAMCAST CONTROLLERS SUCK. END OF STORY.** Even with two VMU's in them they are too light, and the digital control is slippery and hyper-responsive. Add to the overall awkward shape and you've got something that rivals the 5200 controllers for sheer lack of usability.

That being said, fans of the Pac-Man universe may be slightly disappointed to learn that Maze Madness plays much more like an updated Donkey Kong Country than Pac-Land or Pac-Mania. Still, it's not at all an unenjoyable game.

The plot is relayed in absolutely stupid 2-D still frame animation sequences than zoom and fade and do stuff that might have been impressive about five years ago. Once you get to the meat of the game, though, you are treated to a rather nicely rendered world of pirate ships, temples, factories and various other settings as the level design dictates. Most of the character sprites are done very



well also, with both Ms Pac and ghosts changing facial expressions as the situation dictates. There is the occasional polygon-looking beastie, though... and really, is there any reason to still have anything looking like it's made of polygons anymore? Nonetheless, they're there, and you have to say it knocks a couple points off of what otherwise is a visually beautiful game.

The object, essentially, is to complete each maze-like level simply by running to the end and collecting the star found there. Along the way, in addition to traditional Pac foes, the Ghosts, you will encounter various traps such as lightning generators, mist-spewing statues and flaming sticks of TNT. There's plenty of Pac action, though, as each level is, essentially, a maze. In addition to collecting the stars, the traditional Ms. Pac fruits, dots and power pills are littered throughout each level, and collecting all of either the fruits or dots earns you an additional star. However, after the first level or so, dots and fruits become hidden in nefarious places, requiring you to discover hidden passages and backtrack, in some cases the entire length of the level, once you've tripped a switch or found a key.

Yes, Maze Madness truly can cause a fit of madness with its array of simple-yet-confusing puzzles. You will often have to move blocks of TNT in order to destroy other objects or walk on the TNT blocks themselves in order to create a new passageway. The TNT blocks are timed, of course, and standing near or on one when it

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What makes the perfect fighting game?

Xot and Svenyip muse on a favorite subject for discussion

MICHAEL "SVENYIP" TROUPE

On Screen Correspondent

It all started in March of 1991, when Street Fighter II came out. Actually, if you want to be technical, it all started with the ORIGINAL Street Fighter, released all the way back in August of 1987, but the "fighting genre" didn't really explode until the release of SF2.

So after a Decade of Destruction, if you'll pardon the term, Capcom and other companies have created countless numbers of one-on-one fighting games. Some have reached unprecedented heights of video game popularity, while others have a similar level of notoriety. (Time Killers, anyone?) Some less-known games came out with new features that worked, and were quickly snapped up and used by the big boys. And eventually, some series went to the well once too often with the same gimmick, like Mortal Kombat.

After all this time, the question has to be asked: What would make the perfect Street Fighter? What features could realistically be put into a single title to make it stand out above all others, without ending up turning into a game where a character just needs to land one hit and can combo his way to certain victory? And are more options and more characters a sure-fire way to improve a game?

Let's start with Street Fighter Alpha 3.

While it has some issues, SFA3 is still one of the most solid Capcom fighting games out there, and it's one of the only ones where the home version vastly outshines the arcade, adding an unprecedented *eight* more playable characters to the mix. (Granted, Jun, Juli, Evil Ryu, Shin Akuma, and even Guile are remakes of already existing characters, and Balrog existed as a hidden character in the arcade, but Dee Jay, T. Hawk and Fei Long are all new additions to SFA3.) It has a good one-player mode, with each character having a limited story that is embellished with fight dialogue in your fifth, ninth and final battles, as well as a typical ending.

The home versions also include a "World Tour" mode, where you'll go through fighting various enemies or groups of opponents, getting special abilities for your character that you can then use in standard play. Then there's Dramatic Battle, where two people fight against a third. You and a friend can team up to fight against a computer opponent, and in the Dreamcast version, three people can play at once, which is typically a humiliating experience for the one fighting the two. Include a roster of 30+ people, each with their own background stage and music, a variety of -isms to choose between, and the option of a 3-on-3 battle in VS play, and you have a formula for limitless combinations of gameplay.

Despite all this, Street Fighter Alpha 3 isn't the perfect game. The hit detection is a little off at times, as the "hit squares" tend to be larger than the actual body parts appear. This can result in suffering "wind" damage, where you take damage from a Dragon Punch that almost, but not quite, connected. The counter-hit physics take some getting used to, and the fact that after a counter-hit, you can connect with another hit on an opponent with a different attack as they fall from the air—something that had never been possible in a Street Fighter before this point. And while each character has their own stage with their own musical score, a lot of the tracks are very similar sounding and get lost in the shuffle.

But the fact that the issues I'm finding are more nitpicking rather than flaws that make the game unplayable shows that they definitely did something right with this one. So using it as an example, what features are necessary to make the "perfect" Street Fighter?

Characters, and Character Variety

Just having a large number of characters isn't everything. Any game can have 50 characters if a bunch of them are palette-swaps of the same graphic, just with different moves stuck in them. What impresses me about SFA3 is that they have a lot of *different* character

TONY "XOT" MORSE

On Screen Editor

Since the fighting game revolution began some ten years ago, there have been countless entries into the arena. Street Fighter, Mortal Kombat, Virtual Fighter, King of Fighters, Dead or Alive... the list goes on and on and on. But what elements make up the 'perfect' fighting game? Svenyip and I have each come up with our own opinions.

Personally, I would say the closest to perfect thus far has been Street Fighter Alpha 3. There are a lot of different components that go into a successfully fighting game, so I'm going to tackle them one by one.

2-D vs. 3-D

As a child of the 80's, I grew up with 2-D games and as a result I am admittedly biased in this regard. I have always preferred a good 2-D game to a good 3-D game, so to me, the perfect fighter *has* to be 2-D. While a 3-D fighting game isn't necessarily bad, I just haven't seen the 3-D fighter that "wows" me like an SF or KOF game does. One thing I will say, though, is that if a game is drawn in 3-D, it should *play* 3-D. 3-D games with 2-D engines don't cut it for me— I want full 3-D mobility.

Graphics

Of course, graphics matter. But the best game is not necessarily the best looking game. But what I really wanted to address here was hand-drawn vs. digitized graphics. Maybe it's just that I haven't played the right game, but there's no digitized game that impresses me visually like a great, animé-styled hand drawn game. So the Street Fighter and KOF series already have a huge lead on a lot of others. Same thing with rendered graphics—although you can get a lot of nice effects out of them (think VF3), I still prefer the classic hand drawn sprites of your top notch 2-D brawlers. Yes, I am old school.

Character Roster

Again, more isn't automatically better. A classic example is Street Fighter EX+A. Lots of characters, little variety. New characters need to have new moves. That's what I like about Alpha 3— sure, there's a decent number of clone characters, but there are so many different *styles* of character. I mean, just a sample: Adon, Ken, Guile, Karin, Rainbow Mika, Cody, Guy, Gen, Rose, Birdie, Cammy, Honda and

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There was once a time when *this* was considered the 'perfect possible fighting game.' Not *exactly* what we had in mind... Sorry, I was feeling old school again.

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The key to the perfect fighting game is ultimately just common sense

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concepts - they aren't all just fireball-uppercut-hurricane kick characters. You have characters with charge-based moves, characters that rely on counter attacks, characters that are close and grapple, speed characters, power characters - and only a few of them are so hopelessly outmatched that I cringe when I end up getting them on Random Select. Random Select is an important feature to add too, guys! What's the point of having 56 Characters like you do in Marvel VS Capcom 2 and then forcing the player to decide on a team of 3 by themselves all the time?

Control Scheme

Although it doesn't translate well into home controllers, the 6-button option that the Street Fighter series has is better than the SNK games (they have 4 buttons, taking out the mediums) or Mortal Kombat (with highs, lows, and a block). Granted, I don't play with the degree of skill to think about things like how a Zangief Spinning Pile Driver does less damage but has more range if you attempt it with a Light Kick as opposed to a Roundhouse, but it's good that the option is THERE. More attack options are never a bad thing - as long as they remember to beta-test the game first!

Graphics and Sound

At this point, Street Fighter 3: Third Strike probably has the best graphics of any fighting game I've played to date. And in a perfect world, they would re-make Street Fighter Alpha 3 with the same graphic style. The extra frames of animation definitely help make the game shine. As for music, more is better, even if it results in hideous tracks like Elena's from Third Strike. It's better than what they're doing lately - making about a dozen backgrounds not related to any char-

acter, and then putting music to that background. That's the biggest flaw with Capcom VS SNK 2 and Marvel VS Capcom 2. Despite the number of characters, the lack of stages and the lackluster music keeps me from doing prolonged game sessions.

2D vs 3D

We live in a 3D world, both in real life and in video games now. And while 3D games add an extra element to gameplay, they're just never going to look as good as a hand-drawn 2D fighter will. Compare Street Fighter Alpha to Street Fighter EX PLUS Alpha, which didn't even take advantage of the fact that it WAS in 3D. Kudos to Capcom for keeping the true series 2D, where it belongs.

Game Engine

Street Fighter Alpha 3 did this well. You had the choice between X-ISM, with one powerful super and stronger attacks but no air block and a lower defense, A-ISM, with three levels of super, and V-ISM with custom combos and a weaker overall attack (which always seemed an unnecessary handicap, given my aptitude for doing Custom Combos). Maybe the best way to do it would be to let you design your own Groove, like you can in Capcom VS SNK 2. Put a limit on what you can add, of course, but include all the different super options and things like air blocking, parrying, etc. and let the player choose the features he or she likes the best. But I imagine that's not practical in the arcades - having to wait two minutes before each battle just so each character can modify their Groove to best fight against a known opponent...it ends up turning into almost a sideboard on a Magic the Gathering game then.

Gameplay Options

Options are good. Include things to

make the game fun for ONE player rather than just designing it around VS play with the one-player mode as an afterthought. And in your VS play, include cooperative modes, tag battles, 3-on-3 team fights ... the more options, the more shelf-life the title will have.

Story and Presentation

Some people would say a story is completely unnecessary to making a good fighting game. I don't know if I can fully agree with that. King of Fighters '97, with the 'Summoning of Orochi' plotline, was the thing that got me into King of Fighters. In particular, near the end of the game when you re-fight one of the teams while they have Orochi power, and the way that the background destroys itself step by step as you work through the members, as well as the music it played - I'd play it in the arcade just to try to get to that confrontation. And Gill in Third Strike, with his "Mark of my Dignity" Super Saiyan transformation that makes you go, "Oh, hell." THAT'S what you want in a one-player fighter mode. To work your way to a boss that actually makes you sit up and take notice rather than, "Oh, look, it's Bison again." (Although when he hit me with the Shin Psycho Crusher for the first time in SFA3, THAT made me respect him a bit.)

So what makes the perfect Street Fighter? A large character roster, with variety in the fighters. A large number of gameplay options. A large number of -ISM options, so you can play character VS character with radically different strategies. Extra effort put into the music, backgrounds and presentation. And a reason to want to play through the game single-player.

All fairly common-sense things, if you get right down to it. And it's a shame that they so rarely get the formula right.

The importance of variety in fighters cannot be stressed enough

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Blanka each play *nothing* at all like each other. That alone could be an entire roster for its own game. Great fighting games rely on mixing up speedy, brawling, and finesse characters and having them interact well with each other - if the brawlers always crush the finesse guys, then there's no reason for them to even be there. Not all characters should be equal, but they all should have a *chance*. Which leads nicely into...

Moves & Abilities

I like super moves. I like parrying. I like having a LOT of these things. I want to be able to counter your counter by countering your counter attack's counter. Er sumptin. And special moves need to be, well, special. Complex motions to get a fairly bland attack are no fun (re: Virtua Fighter).

This is what Alpha 3 and Capcom vs. SNK 2 do so well. They allow you to select different "modes" for characters to allow you to use the abilities you want - be it Custom Combos, multi-level Supers or Alpha Counters. Alpha 3 even goes the extra mile and gives you the World Tour mode - where, by defeating more and more opponents, you can combine the abilities from different modes. You could end up with a character with Custom Combos and Multi-Level

supers, for example, or something otherwise not offered. So if parrying doesn't work for you, don't select it; use Alpha Counters instead, or settle for Air Blocking. This amalgam of options helps you to create a character that perfectly suits your own individual style - and thus becomes more of an extension of *you*. It truly becomes *mano-a-mano* with your opponent... with few, if any, of your actions limited to what the game can do.

Match Format

Whether it be two out of three or three out of five, the basic match has gotten pretty boring. And in my opinion the tag team format of the Marvel vs. Capcom series just doesn't appeal that much to me. I prefer the three-on-three bouts of the King of Fighters series. Of course, giving the players the option of choosing among several formats is never a bad thing - as long as that three-on-three option is there. ☺

Conclusion

A variety of options is usually what makes the difference in any game, and the fighting game genre is no different. That's where Alpha 3 truly excels... and from what I've played of Capcom vs. SNK 2, it looks like they're on to something there. I suppose, in that aspect, more really is better.

The Dragon Warrior series returns to the US

After skipping a couple of chapters, volume VII keeps tradition alive

System: Sony Playstation

Publisher: Enix

Release Date: November 2, 2001

MICHAEL "SVENYIP" TROUPE
On Screen Correspondent

After a number of years, the Dragon Warrior series finally makes its return appearance to the US on a console system. Various games like "Dragon Warrior Monsters" have come out for the Game Boy, but this is the first *real* Dragon Warrior sequel to have an American release since Dragon Warrior IV for the original NES.

And playing this game, it was a definite gamble to release this title in a place where Final Fantasy VII has become the measuring stick to compare RPGs to. It took me almost *three hours* to get past the first series of puzzles and get out of the opening land to reach a place where I could fight my first actual enemy! And there are no Convenient "save and restore health" points just before bosses- it's rare that there are any of either in a dungeon. So you actually need to ration your MP use, never knowing if a boss is going to catch you with your pants down just around the next bend. Good old-school, intensely frustrating gameplay.

Your starting party consists of the main character (who looks sort of like Link from The Legend of Zelda), a prince with no sense of responsibility, and a snobbish girl who I keep hoping they drop a giant iron ball on her head, Final Fantasy IV fashion. Later, you find a wild boy who reminds me of Gau from Final Fantasy VI. Hardly a cast of heroes, especially when your starting classes are things like "Fisherman's Son." I'm almost glad I haven't found a way to rename the other characters yet, as I don't know if I'd want to call them by any of my friends' names.

The story appears to be that ages ago, a Demon Lord sealed all of the various continents of the world away from each other, for reasons known only to him or her. You come across various "land shards" in your travels, as well as a lost temple where you can unite the shards together, gaining access to these other continents in the past. Some sort of crisis is inevitably going on in the continent, and after you resolve that, the seal is broken and that continent returns to



the real world in the present, where you can visit it to see what's changed- and typically find another land shard there to gain access to the *next* continent.

This system of gameplay has proven to be annoying- you can generally assume that there will be a land shard nearby any major event, just to make sure you've seen that event before going on to the next place. But if you miss a land shard early on only to discover you need it fifteen hours later, it can be very hard to track them down. I'll admit, I've already broken down and looked at the "land shard FAQ" on gamefaqs.com more than once. It's like

they make these games now *knowing* that most of the world will use FAQs, so they try to make them so complicated that even that FAQs won't always help.

...and yes, even though I use 'em, FAQs *still* suck.

Eventually, you reach the "Temple of Dharma" in the game, something that makes a return appearance from Dragon Warrior III. Here, you can change your class (after dealing with the long and convoluted quest that you need to complete to be able to do so). Unlike in DW3, you don't return to first level after changing class. Instead, you acquire knowledge in a class that stays with you, and your stats are altered depending on what your main class is. So over time, you can play as a Fighter that knows a variety of offensive spells (but would have a low MP, being a fighter), or a Thief that can heal, or any number of combinations. In addition, certain advanced classes are only available after you master two basic classes, and it sounds like some elite classes become available after mastering the advanced ones. You can even fight enemies and get "monster classes" that you can learn, although I haven't gotten far enough to understand how that works yet. So you can easily sit around and spend hours just improving your jobs if you aren't sure where you need to go next in the story. (Which describes my current situation.)

While it doesn't exactly *FEEL* like a Dragon Warrior game, since we haven't been able to play either DW5 or DW6, who knows how the game engine evolved during those titles? It would be the same as playing Final Fantasy 4 and then going straight to 7...

...well, okay, it feels a hell of a lot more like a Dragon Warrior game than FFXII felt like a Final Fantasy. ☺

Maze Madness an enjoyable game for the extremely patient

Continued from Page 4

goes off results in instantaneous death. There are also poison blocks which cause the aforementioned sudden demise when you come into contact with them *at all*. Add to this mix foes running around either attacking you or obstructing the path of the blocks and other hazards flying around you at the same time, and frustration rapidly ensues.

Getting all the items in a maze can be worthwhile, if you have multiple controllers and multiple friends, since collecting more stars (beyond the number required to advance in the game) unlocks multiplayer options in which you play a variety of Bomberman-style mini games. These games are fast paced and enjoyable, although playing them against the computer is yet

another exercise in frustration. Also included is a version of the original Ms. Pac-Man arcade game- the same port as in Namco Museum Volume 3.

There are also a number of intermittent bonus levels in which you're not in any sort of maze, but sort of racing. These are not much fun, but they do contain fruits and dots, so those among us who must unlock *everything* are sure to play through them multiple times to get all the stars.

These bizarre race stages culminate in the "Gobbler" stage, in which what can only be described as a gigantic mutant pac-



Many Dreamcast titles can now be found for under \$10 at Best Buy and other retailers.

beast chases behind you and devours the maze as you attempt to escape. This stage is in reverse first person, so Ms Pac and the Gobbler are coming towards you. I bet this looks absolutely awful on the lesser systems, nevertheless, it's kind of cool on the DC. Except, of course, the absolute precision required

to navigate the maze and avoid the death blocks is nearly impossible to achieve on the DC controllers.

Overall, this is not a great game, but for the nine bucks I paid for it, I'm more than satisfied. Those of you with more patience than I will surely get more enjoyment out of it. But like most bargain bin titles, it's certainly worth the price of admission.

Dynasty Warriors 3 satisfies a limited audience

System: Playstation 2

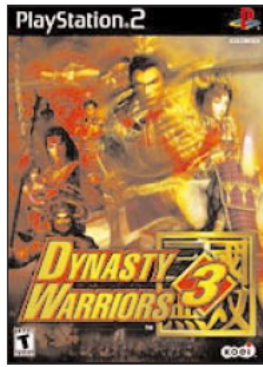
Publisher: Koei

Release Date: November 28, 2001

MICHAEL "SVENYIP" TROUPE
On Screen Correspondent

Dynasty Warriors 2 was one of the only games for the PS2 when it first came out that impressed me. It actually tried to do something new and stay fun at the same time. As a legendary hero in the middle of a massive battle, it was up to you if you wanted to fight alongside your allies and slowly work your way to the enemy generals, or if you wanted to charge into the fray and try to stand against insurmountable odds. It could be played as either a strategy game or a massive beat-em-up, and I never got tired of getting on a horse and watching enemies fly everywhere as I ran them down. So when I heard that Dynasty Warriors 3 was coming out, I kept an eye on the release date, knowing that was another title I'd have to own.

As the game is based off of the "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" period of time, which is around 180-250 AD, I wasn't too surprised when this game ended up being a re-telling of the same story and recreations of some of the same major battles that were fought in DW2. They've added more minor battles, though, and the battles you fight are based off of which of the three kingdoms you decide to play as a general of. They aren't all major wars, either-



some are things like "guard the village" or "fight to and defeat the defecting general," which adds new levels of depth to the game.

New to the game is equipment - as you play through the stages, you'll find new weapons for your general to use, which add to your attack power and number of hits, allowing some elaborate combos. There are also legendary artifacts which will improve your stats and give abilities - you can equip up to five of them, and items found by one general can be used by another as you play through the game again. (The weapons seem to be general-specific, however, so you won't be walking through the first stage with the Godslayer of Hit Points - unless you replay with the same general.)

Another new feature, and one I may never get to use do to lack of spare time, is the two-player simultaneous mode. Either fighting together against a computer-controlled army, or fighting VS each other with balanced characters and armies, this option allows for infinite replayability. And the old features from DW2, like unlocking up to 40 different generals and getting the ability to fight on the "evil" side of any battle, also remain.

It's not a title for everyone, though, because in essence you just wander around mashing on the attack button, then finding another group of enemies and doing it all over again. But once you learn how to read the map, if you're the kind of person that likes games like Final Fight and Double Dragon, and don't mind that you can rack up over 1,000 kills before clearing some of the stages, I recommend giving Dynasty Warriors 3 a try. Grab a friend, grab your sword, hop on your elephant (...why are there elephants in this game, anyway?), and let the fun begin.

"Nightmare System" revitalizes an admittedly aging Mega Man engine

Continued from Page 3

Boutique's 10-day return period because it didn't interest me enough to even play through it a second time?

As the game powered up, I saw some things that, while I'm sure they were just done because they had to rush to get the game out so quickly, really impressed me. To start, they kept the Japanese opening song! And the dialogue remained in the cut-scenes, but it was *subtitled*! I wouldn't have to worry about any mumbled "Dark Evil Energy" dubs this time.

The premise to this game is that Zero seemingly died while saving the earth from destruction, but a new force called the 'Nightmare of Zero' has appeared causing robots to go maverick. X, now armed with Zero's Z-Saber in addition to the X-Buster, goes out in search of Zero's fate. This requires him to follow eight other investigators in eight other areas - who, of course, all go maverick and attack him.

Which brings us to the scary part - they kept the Japanese music, they kept the Japanese voices, and for the first time ever, they kept the Japanese Names. "Ground Scaravich." "Infinity Mijinion." "Commander Yammark." "Metal Shark Player." What the hell is a Metal Shark Player?!? And from what I've seen of the 'bots, they're either too easy to mow down, or have some sort of a

stupid gimmick that makes them feel more like a sub-boss, like having to hit specific points on their back before you can even damage the body.

To try and encourage stage replay, each stage has sixteen Reploids that you have to try to find and rescue. Each Reploid recovers some life, gives you a 1-Up, and may have a power-up like a Heart Container or Weapon Part that you'll gain access to when you complete the stage. Some of these are in hard-to-get places, requiring special armors or abilities to get to. So you'll need to revisit the stage to get them.

In addition, this game has what's called the "Nightmare System," where parts of the stages are randomly generated each time you go through them. So a path that was once safe may end up having spikes in it, a barrier could appear where there was once none, or a new enemy type may suddenly appear. It's not as drastic as it sounds (of course, I haven't replayed too many stages yet, so I might be wrong on that), but it's sure... different.

The stage design, much like the 'bots, is also way too gimmicky. There's a stage where you get transported to an alternate area until you defeat a totem pole, then return to the normal area only to fight a larger totem pole boss and then get sent back to the alternate area again. Or one where you have to fight a giant donut-shaped sub-boss.

Or dodge magma, or duck ice avalanches, or deal with acid rain or a metal crushing press. Which wouldn't be too bad, except when the entire stage revolves around dealing with this one threat, the novelty quickly wears off.

I'm not sure if Sigma's the final boss or not - being around the holidays and all, I've had little time to play it, and have only defeated three robot masters. Shred's gotten further than me, getting past six, and now has the problem of not being able to get to one of the last two and not being able to figure out how to damage the other.

And for all the people out there that are worried that they've killed Zero off for good and you'll just have X to play through the game as, fear not. The instruction booklet indicates you obviously get some sort of partner, which they just call "Hunter." But when "Hunter" has abilities called 'Shouenzan,' 'Rakukojin' and 'Ensuizan'... well, only one character's ever had move names like that.

Megaman X6 tries to take the game in new directions to keep it fresh. And while I don't like all of the changes, especially the gimmicky feel of the bosses, I still find myself "morally obligated" to go through it and find out if they'll ever explain the connection between Dr. Wily and Sigma. But then, this is Capcom - they're notorious for not resolving their storylines.